THE YET UNKNOWN WORLD LITERATURE

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RESUMO: Literatura-Mundo não faz sentido se compreendida literalmente, porque não é a soma total de todas as literaturas nacionais. Se compreendida literalmente, a literatura-mundo se tornaria, diz Claudio Guillén, uma "ideia louca, inalcançável na prática, que não mereceria um leitor real, mas um iludido guardião de arquivos que também fosse multimilionário."

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Literatura-mundo, Circulação, leitura de grandes obras de literatura

ABSTRACT: World literature does not make sense if understood literally, for it is not the sum total of all national literatures. Literally understood, world literature would become, says Claudio Guillén, a "wild idea, unattainable in practice, worthy not of an actual reader but of a deluded keeper of archives who is also a multimillionaire."

KEYWORDS: World Literature, Circulation, the Reading of Great Works of Literature

World literature does not make sense if understood literally, for it is not the sum total of all national literatures. Literally understood, world literature would become, says Claudio Guillén, a "wild idea, unattainable in practice, worthy not of an actual reader but of a deluded keeper of archives who is also a multimillionaire."[2] Obviously, world literature does not and cannot mean the incredibly huge number of all the literary works put together from the world's various literary traditions. Many have tried to define or redefine world literature to turn the "wild idea" into something sensible, and among these David Damrosch has offered a most influential definition that has helped the rise of world literature in recent scholarship. He takes "world literature to encompass all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language."[3] This definition is influential because it effectively reduces the monstrously innumerable works of literature to a more or less manageable amount and thereby sets up the basic threshold of world literature. "A work enters world literature by a double process," Damrosch argues: "first, by being read *as* literature; second, by circulating out into a broader world beyond its linguistic and cultural point of origin."[4]

Circulation is the keyword in Damrosch's definition, and indeed great works of world literature—from the Homeric epics to Dante and Shakespeare, from Rabelais and Cervantes to Dickens and Balzac, from Jane Austen to Virginia Woolf, from Goethe and Hugo to Wordsworth and Keats, from Baudelaire and Rilke to T. S. Eliot and Yeats, from James Joyce to Kafka and many more—become well-known on a global scale by circulating widely and being read either in their original or in translation by readers far beyond their linguistic and cultural point of origin. Circulation thus separates works of international renown and prestige

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[2] Claudio Guillén, *The Challenge of Comparative Literature*, trans. Cola Franzen (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 38.
[3] David Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 4.
[4] Ibid., p. 6.

from those other works that remain locally known and read, and therefore not part of world literature.

Circulation as such, however, does not seem to me sufficient to distinguish a work of truly global significance from the numerous other works that are popular and circulating on the book market for a time as international best-sellers. We all know that many commercially successful best-selling books promoted by publishers and popular in the market do not survive the frivolous and capricious taste of the reading public, though best-sellers are not by definition devoid of literary values and incapable of becoming truly great works. It is of course a value judgment when we identify some works as "great" or "truly great," but do not characterize other works in the same way. Value judgment is unavoidable in the reading and appreciation of literature, but value judgment is something literary scholars tend to shun in the current academic environment, particularly in American and European universities, where values are recognized as being contingent on economic, social and political factors, and considered to be elitist, politically incorrect, and even ideologically repressive. It is therefore understandable that the literary value of a work does not figure explicitly in Damrosch's definition of world literature. In his discussion of the changing concept of world literature "as an established body of *classics*, as an evolving canon of *masterpieces*, or as multiple *windows on the world*," however, he tacitly touches on the question of value and value judgment.[5] From *classics* to canon of *masterpieces* to *windows on the world*, there is an implicit gradation of values, and not every literary work that circulates in the world can make into any of these categories. That is to say, literary values are actually important in distinguishing what is and is not world literature. Therefore, using circulation as the key to the conceptualization of world literature does not seem to me adequate in differentiating great works worthy of being part of world literature from the large number of books that are simply popular and circulating beyond their linguistic and cultural point of origin. Circulation is descriptive of the process of a book's reception, so Damrosch also speaks of world literature as "a mode of circulation and of reading, a mode that is as applicable to individual works as to bodies of material, available for reading established classics and new discoveries alike."[6] In my view, world literature cannot and should not be just those already widely circulating classics or masterpieces, which, as I mentioned above, are almost exclusively Western canonical works from Homer to Kafka. I am not at all suggesting debunking or "decanonizing" the great Western canon, but I am making the claim that world literature should encompass much more than the already well-known Western canonical works. For me, world literature is exciting because it offers numerous opportunities to expand the canon of world literature to include great works of other literary traditions, particularly non-Western and even "minor" European traditions, works that remain unknown or little read beyond the scope of their national traditions, but works that have been recognized as of high literary values and have become canonical in those literary traditions.

In the last ten to fifteen years, world literature has become a burgeoning new field in literary studies in many different regions in the world. It is on the rise because, in my view, it satisfies the need of reading great works of literature after the dominance of literary theories and cultural studies, which reached their height of development in the 1980s and the 1990s almost at the expense of literature. Robert Alter already argued in 1989 that it was a great failure of literary studies that "so many among a whole generation of professional students of literature have turned away from reading," and, more damagingly, that they even developed "an attitude sometimes approaching disdain for literature."[7] Frank Kermode put it more clearly in a sarcastic

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[5] Ibid., p. 15.

[6] Ibid., p. 5.

[7] Robert Alter, *The Pleasure of Reading in an Ideological Age* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), pp. 10-11.

vein that through "a series of institutional decisions" in the academic world, many literary scholars had "ceased to talk much about literature."[8] This was confirmed by Haun Saussy in his 2006 report on the state of the discipline of comparative literature in American universities when he observed that "at moments in the last few decades, it has seemed possible to make a career in literary studies without making sustained reference to works of literature."[9] In this context, we may well understand the significance of considering a work "being read *as* literature" to be the first step in Damrosch's "double process," by which a work "enters world literature." As the art of language, literature is meant to be read and enjoyed, but for quite some time now, reading literature, particularly reading literature for its literary values and aesthetic pleasure, has become a problem in America and the West in general because of the highly politicized critical theories and cultural studies, the "canon war" and the "decanonization" of great Western works of literature, the fragmentization of the literary profession as perhaps a reflection of the fragmentization of the American society. I have discussed this issue elsewhere, and I argue that world literature may offer the best prospect for literary studies today and for the future:

> Reading as a critical problem will be solved in the act of reading itself, and it is probably in reading the best works of different literary traditions from East and West that the future of our discipline lies. It is our hope that by returning to great works of world literature we may achieve a revitalization of literary studies, balancing the aesthetic experience of reading for pleasure on the one hand with the intellectual gratification of theoretical depth and insight on the other.[10]

World literature not only makes it possible to return to the reading of great works of literature without apology, but also opens up the concept of literary canon to many great works in the world's literary traditions that have not yet been known or read *as world literature*. But why do we need to insist on the controversial idea of canon? This is related to the problem of world literature as an impossible "wild idea" we mentioned at the very beginning. *Ars longa, vita brevis*. Or as Zhuangzi, the great Chinese Daoist philosopher, puts it: "My life has its boundaries, but knowledge is boundless. To pursue the boundless with the bounded, that is perilous."[11] The brevity of life or the relentless pushing ahead of time constitutes a deep-rooted human anxiety to which many poets have given expressions in different ways. "Had we but World enough, and Time," the lover sadly realizes in a famous poem by Andrew Marvel; "But at my back I always hear / Times winged Charriot hurrying near."[12] Because it is humanly impossible to read all books, it becomes important and necessary that we use our time wisely and read only the best and most valuable books, that is to say, the canonical works of the world's various literary traditions. Ideally, all great works of literature in the world should circulate

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[8] Frank Kermode, *Pleasure and Change: The Aesthetics of Canon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 15, 16.

[9] Haun Saussy, "Exquisite Cadavers Stitched from Fresh Nightmares: Of Memes, Hives, and Selfish Genes," in Haun Saussy (ed.), *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), p. 12.

[10] Zhang Longxi, "Reading Literature as a Critical Problem," in Ruth Vanita (ed.), *India and the World: Postcolonialism, Translation and Indian Literature: Essays in Honour of Professor Harish Trivedi* (New Delhi: Pencraft International, 2014), p. 15.

[11] Guo Qingfan 郭慶藩(ed.), *Zhuangzi jishi* 莊子集釋[*The Variorum Edition of the Zhuangzi*], in vol. 3 of *Zhuzi jicheng* 諸子集成[*Collection of Masters Writings*], 8 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1954), chapter 3, "The Chief of Nurturing Life," p. 54.

[12] Andre Marvel, "To his Coy Mistress," in Louis L. Martz (ed.), *English Seventeenth-Century Verse*, vol. 1 (New York: W. W. Norton, 1969), pp. 301, 302.

widely and constitute the canon of world literature, but unfortunately the reality is that not every book circulating widely is of high literary value and worthy of our careful reading, and that not every work of great value, particularly works from non-Western traditions or even the so-called "minor" traditions in European literature, has made it into the canon of world literature. "In fact, in most histories of world literature, hitherto without exception products of the Western world," as Theo D'haen observes, "non-European literatures were routinely neglected especially in their more modern manifestations." Even among European literatures, he continues to argue, "treatment has been unequal. Concretely, French, English, and German literature, and to a lesser extent Italian and Spanish literature, next to literature in ancient Greek and in Latin, have received the lion's share of attention and space."[13] But surely many literary traditions outside the major European literatures also have their own great works, some of which should be introduced and widely circulate to become part of world literature. The fact is, however, many of these works remain untranslated and thus unknown internationally, however great and canonical they may be in their own cultures.

This is what I call the imbalance of power between Western and non-Western countries and their cultures; the imbalance of soft power as related to the imbalance of economic, political, and military power. The difference of knowledge would be a clear indication: a Chinese college student with some basic education would know the names of major Western writers and poets from Homer to Kafka, but a college student in American or European universities would hardly have any idea who the great Chinese writers and poets are. It is unlikely that a Western student would have heard of Du Fu, Li Po, Tao Yuanming, Su Dongpo and the many other canonized authors, even though their works are highly valued in China. The Chinese language has probably more speakers than any other, and Chinese literature is a major and long tradition that dates back to more than three thousand years, but when it comes to world-wide circulation, Chinese literary tradition is definitely a "minor" one in comparison with the major European literatures. Therefore, it is not as strange as it may sound when I argue that much of world literature remains unknown and yet to be discovered by students of world literature.

In all countries and cultures, critics and scholars have established literary traditions of canonical works that constitute the very pillar of those traditions, the best and most valuable works that are vehicles of the most important values of their culture and tradition. If world literature is to include only the best of the world's various traditions, it should be a collection and integration of literary canons from different traditions. But how do we know which works are canonical in different traditions, particularly traditions outside the well-known European canon, canonical works in non-European traditions and "minor" literatures written in "less studied" languages? What are the best works in Persian and Arabic literature, in African and Australian literature, in Dutch, Polish, Scandinavian, or Serbian literature? Who are the major poets and writers in Brazilian or Argentinian literature? Canon and literary criticism are closely related, so we need scholars and critics from different cultural traditions to argue for the canonicity and value of the best works in their traditions, and convince us why a particular work is valuable and worth reading beyond its culture of origin. From this perspective, it becomes clear that world literature should include the world's canonical works not just from major literary traditions in French, English, German, Italian or Spanish, but much more from hitherto globally unrecognized literary canons, and that literary criticism and scholarly argument are needed to make the case of the canonicity and value of a particular work or group of works, and to convince readers of their values and readability far beyond their native linguistic and cultural environment. This is an important task for all students of comparative and world literature, a task that calls for our persistent effort and diligent work, and also points toward unknown territories with the excitement of new discoveries of value and of beauty.

[13] Theo D'haen, "Major/Minor in World Literature," *Journal of World Literature*, 1:1 (Spring 2016): 34.

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